

## THE CONSTITUTION OF EVENTS

## ABSTRACT

Donald Davidson argues that 'the stabbing of Caesar' and 'the killing of Caesar' are two descriptions of the one event whereas Jaegwon Kim contends events are more fine-grained and two events occurred, related by supervenience. I argue that neither solution is satisfactory and, inspired by Lynne Rudder Baker, I develop a constitution relation governing co-occurring, co-located events such that the stabbing of Caesar comes to constitute the killing of Caesar when the stabbing occurs in the appropriate circumstances. According to my view, the stabbing of Caesar is metaphysically distinct from the killing of Caesar such that the killing is dependent on the stabbing, yet is not identical to it.

*1. Events*

As there are no happenings that are not events, the category of events includes anything that happens. Unsurprisingly, events are ubiquitous. Those happenings that occur seemingly instantaneously, such as spontaneous combustion, are events, as are those happenings of a few seconds, such as Davidson's (1963b) flipping of the light switch; a few minutes, such as ironing a dress; a few hours, such as a picnic; a day trip, a week down the coast, a year abroad, and the Second World War. Events such as these are the focus of this discussion. Interesting debates about whether events are properties, facts, states of affairs, or ontologically prior to objects are beyond the scope of this article.

Judith Jarvis Thomson (1977) points out that the sceptical nature of philosophers creates pressure to establish that there are such things as events before going on to talk about them, but the arguments of this article will be of interest to philosophers of either persuasion. This article outlines a theory of the relation between co-occurring and co-located events. If events do not exist, this contribution is still interesting as a semantic theory of events.

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## 2. *The Individuation of Events*

The problem of the individuation of events was outlined by Davidson (1980b, 163) as the challenge of articulating when events are identical, and when distinct. When evaluating the relationship between event descriptions, there are some cases in which it seems obvious that two descriptions are of the one event. For example, 'The Bride married the Groom' and 'The Groom married the Bride' are multiple ways of describing the same event—the wedding. This is the line taken by Davidson (1963b; 1980b) for these cases of straightforward redescription and, mistakenly in my opinion, other cases.

Davidson (1963b, 4) writes, "I flip the switch, turn on the light, and illuminate the room. Unbeknownst to me I also alert a prowler to that fact that I am at home. Here I do not do four things, but only one, of which four descriptions have been given." However, given an interpretation of Leibniz's Law whereby modal differences can result in the nonidentity of entities, it is not straightforward that these events are identical. For example, it could have been the case that the switch was flipped without alerting the prowler. The light bulb may have blown, the prowler could have been blind, or just not alerted because they had already heard the light flipper coming. There are modal differences between the events, if not actual differences, and we need some way to account for the property differences.

Davidson rejects the position that the differences in modal properties between Brutus's stabbing of Caesar, and Brutus's killing of Caesar suggests the event descriptions are not identical. Although a stabbing may not lead to a death and therefore fail to be a killing, Davidson (1980a, 171) argues that a particular stabbing may stand in a token-token identity relation to a killing. The fact that *that* stabbing did lead to a death means it is therefore a killing. I disagree. That very stabbing might not have been a killing. That exact stabbing could have occurred whilst Caesar was immortal, protecting him from being killed. And in the case of the light switch, that exact event of flipping the light switch could have occurred when the prowler was blind to change in light, or just not there. It is possible that *that* exact stabbing (i.e., the plunging the knife into Caesar) could have occurred without being a killing, and this is an example of a modal property the stabbing has but the killing does not. Therefore, with an application of Leibniz's Law, the stabbing and the killing are not identical. Likewise, the flipping of the switch is not identical with alerting the prowler.

Whether differences in modal properties justifies multiplying entities is a matter of debate. For example, to avoid multiplying entities, some critics have argued for alternative accounts of modal predication (e.g., Lewis 1986; Noonan 1993; Sider 2001). Yet support remains for granting the multiplication of entities on the basis of modal differences (see Baker 1997; 2000; 2008) and in the spirit of pursuing the best explanation let us suppose a broad application of Leibniz's Law for cases such as the stabbing and killing of Caesar. This will allow us to investigate alternative accounts of the relation between the events which may justify avoiding alternative accounts of modal predication. Whilst the problem of the individuation of events remains a worthy project, a related problem has been unearthed—a problem of event constitution, analogous to the problem of material constitution. Granting that differences in modal properties between two events are respected as a means to rule out that they are related by identity, how are events such as the stabbing and killing of Caesar related?

### 3. *Supervenience*

Differences in modal properties are clearly accounted for by Kim's (1976) theory of events where the flipping of the switch and alerting of the prowler are shown to be two events. According to Kim, events involve the exemplification of a property or properties by an object or objects at a certain time. That is, each event (such as,  $x$ ) can be expressed in terms of an object,  $a$ , property,  $P$  and time,  $t$ . And what it takes for event  $x$  to be identical to event  $y$  is that  $y$ 's object is identical to  $a$ , its property is identical to  $P$  and its time is identical to  $t$ . Consider the example of Brutus's stabbing of Caesar and Brutus's killing of Caesar. According to Kim (1966, 232) "it is not at all absurd to say that Brutus' killing Caesar is *not the same as* Brutus' stabbing Caesar." Each event concerns the same object, Caesar and each occurs at  $t$ . However, the property of being killed is not the same as the property of being stabbed and analogously the property of having the room you are in illuminated (by the flipping of a switch) is not the same as the property of being alerted. Thus, the stabbing and the killing, and the flipping and alerting, are not identical events.

On Kim's theory of events, the stabbing of Caesar and the killing of Caesar are not identical events—yet they are related. For Kim, event  $x$  (concerning object  $a$ , time  $t$  and property  $P$ ) is supervenient on  $y$  (concerning object  $b$ , time  $t'$ , and property  $Q$ ) iff  $a = b$ ,  $t = t'$ , and  $P$

supervenies on  $Q$ . That is, when two events concern the same object and the same times, but concern different properties, the one event supervenes on the other. What it means for  $x$  to supervene on  $y$  is that there can be no change in the properties of  $x$  without a corresponding change in the properties of  $y$ . So, in the case at hand, supervenience allows for the fact that there's a difference in modal properties between the events and as supervenience is not identity, Leibniz's Law is not violated. Supervenience also allows for there to be two events, the stabbing, and the killing of Caesar.

Here are two reasons not to endorse Kim's supervenience account as the solution to the relation between events such as the stabbing and killing of Caesar. The first is that holding the view that events have properties as constituents means that any change in the property of an event results in a new event. On Kim's view your wedding would be a different event according to whether or not your obscure second cousin was in attendance. Instead, I prefer the view that the very same wedding occurs whether or not your cousin attends. Our theory of events should allow events to tolerate changes in properties. This can be achieved by preferring the view that events have properties analogous to the way that a lump of clay has the property of weighing one kilogram.

The second reason to reject supervenience in cases such as the stabbing and killing of Caesar is that there can be a change in the killing of Caesar without there being a change in the stabbing of Caesar. That is, there can be a difference in supervenient qualities without a difference in subvenient qualities. I've given the example that the stabbing of Caesar by Brutus could have been such that Caesar survived, meaning that there is a change in the killing of Caesar (the supervenient event), but no change in the stabbing of Caesar (the subvenient event). As a solution to the problem of event constitution, let us explore a relation similar to supervenience in that the differences in modal properties between two events are respected as a means to rule out identity, yet that allows individual events to tolerate minor changes in properties.

A constitution relation has the potential to satisfy the intuition that the stabbing and the killing are unified events (the killing could not have occurred without the stabbing), but not identical events (since the stabbing could have occurred without being the killing).

#### 4. *The Constitution View of Events*

Lynne Rudder Baker's (2000; 2007) constitution view of objects and matter, and persons and bodies suggests an intermediary position between identity and separability. Rather than think objects are either identical to, or separate from their matter, Baker proposes a third possibility—that objects and their matter are related by constitution. According to Baker, each object has a primary-kind property. This is the object's essence, or the property which, if lost, results in the end of the object. On Baker's view, an object of one primary-kind property can come to constitute another object of a distinct primary-kind property given circumstances conducive to the primary-kind property of the constituted object. For example, a lump of clay can come to constitute a statue when presented as an artwork. In the case that a lump of clay constitutes a statue,  $x$  and  $y$  are unified such that  $y$  is metaphysically dependent on  $x$ , one thing can be counted in the world ( $y$  as constituted by  $x$ ) and  $x$  and  $y$  share properties derivatively. That is,  $x$  has some properties by virtue of constituting  $y$ , and  $y$  has some properties in virtue of being constituted by  $x$ .

Consider a direct application of Baker's (2007, 161) constitution relation to the problem of events. Where  $x$  and  $y$  are events:

- 1)  $x$  has the primary-kind property, ' $F$ ' and  $y$  has the primary-kind property ' $G$ .'
- 2)  $x$  and  $y$  are spatially coincident at  $t$  and all events with the primary-kind property  $G$ , spatially coincident with  $x$  at  $t$ , are  $y$ .
- 3)  $x$  is in  $G$ -favourable circumstances at  $t$ .
- 4) It is necessary that for all  $z$  with the primary-kind property of  $F$  at  $t$ , and in  $G$ -favourable circumstances at  $t$ , there is some  $w$  with the primary-kind property of  $G$  that is spatially coincident with  $z$  at  $t$ .
- 5) It is possible that  $x$  could exist at  $t$  and there not be some event with the primary-kind property of  $G$ , spatially coincident with  $x$  at  $t$ .
- 6) If  $x$  is of one basic kind of stuff, then  $y$  is of the same basic kind of stuff.

The merit of such an attempted analysis of when event  $x$  constitutes event  $y$  is that it provides a solution that preserves Leibniz's Law and accounts for the property differences between events such as the stabbing and killing of Caesar. By 5), the constitution relation for events is contingent. The stabbing of Caesar could happen without being the killing of Caesar. Constitution is not identity—the properties of constitution differ to the properties of identity. Constitution for events is irreflexive; the event of the stabbing of Caesar does not constitute itself. Constitution is asymmetric; the killing of Caesar does not constitute the stabbing of him. And constitution is transitive. If thrusting the knife at Caesar constitutes the stabbing, and the stabbing constitutes the killing, then the plunging of the knife at Caesar also constitutes the killing. However, a number of points require clarification. For one, primary-kind properties do not seem to be the kind of thing that is straightforwardly had by events. Secondly, work needs to be done to clarify what it would mean for events to be co-located. And finally, clause 6) applies directly to matter and I need to determine whether there is an analogous clause appropriate for a relation between events.

#### *4.1 The primary-kind property of an event*

Baker (2000; 2007) describes constitution to be a relation between individuals with primary-kind properties. A primary-kind property can be understood as the property which, if lost, results in the nonexistence of the object. The primary-kind property of an object is determined by an interplay of function, convention, and origin and determining the primary-kind property of an everyday object is usually straightforward. For example, the primary-kind property of the Mona Lisa is to be a painting. The *U.S.S. Constitution* is a ship and the quill used to sign the U.S. Constitution has the primary-kind property, 'quill.' The analogous property for events is also intuitive.

Hacker (1992, 479) says, 'the *esse* of events is to take place, happen or occur.' Indeed, the 'esse,' essence, or primary-kind property of an event is to happen. Take the event of Caesar's stabbing. We can determine the primary-kind property by considering what would have needed to be the case for that event not to have occurred. Simply, if no one had stabbed Caesar, there would be no event that was the stabbing of Caesar. The primary-kind property of an event is to have happened.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4.2 *Co-occurring, co-located events*

Baker's relation of constitution is between co-located objects. Given events such as the stabbing of Caesar and the killing of Caesar are not as straightforwardly located as objects, I will give some reasons to think that they are located but first I clarify how events co-occur.

Consider the case in which Caesar was stabbed, and died as a result of the stabbing. In this case, the stabbing co-occurred with the killing. However, I do not deny the fact that a killing requires a death and presumably Caesar had time to utter, 'Et tu, Brute?' before he died. Caesar's death does postdate his stabbing. If the fact that his death postdates his stabbing is taken as evidence that the killing continues until Caesar's death, the criteria of co-occurrence will need further modification to encompass cases such as stabbings and killings. However, I do not consider the fact that the death postdates the stabbing as evidence that the killing occurs for longer than the stabbing. Rather, I consider the verification that the stabbing was a killing to have come post-event. Nevertheless, should critics of my view prefer to consider the killing as an event which includes the time up until the death (perhaps long after the event of the stabbing has ended), my constitution view of events will still be able to account for the scenario with the clause that events co-occur being broadly construed to include cases of overlapping occurrences such as the stabbing and the killing.<sup>2</sup>

It has been suggested to me that causation, rather than constitution, could be the appropriate way to understand the relation between events such as the stabbing and killing of Caesar. If the stabbing and the killing are not two ways of describing the same event, it may be argued that the stabbing causes the killing, rather than constitutes the killing. The force of this objection may be heightened for the constitution theorist who adopts a broad interpretation of co-occurrence. If the death occurs 24 hours after the stabbing, and the killing occurred up until the death, it may enhance the intuition that there was "one object, followed by another, where all objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second" (Hume 2000, 60), such that the relation between the stabbing and the killing is one of causation.

Given the awkwardness associated with considering the killing to be an event that continues to occur as long as it takes for the victim to die, I

prefer the view that the killing occurs at the time of the stabbing. However, if I were to grant that the killing continues to occur up until the death, constitution can still be deemed a more appropriate relation than causation as the relation between the stabbing and the killing.

Consider the occurrence of a prolonged killing which briefly overlaps the occurrence of a stabbing. Even if this case adequately satisfies the Humean conception of causation, the case may fail other markers of causal dependence. Hume's conception does not consider cases of immanent causation and to consider a case one of causation, it is commonly thought that the case must be law governed and counterfactually supporting.<sup>3</sup>

Consider whether the signing of the U.S. Constitution causes the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. If this was a case of causation we may expect that the signing of the Constitution is always the ratification of the Constitution, as governed by natural law. However, it is not governed by any law—natural or otherwise. Instead, the case is the foundation for law. Were the case to be governed by law we would expect that the signing could not occur without it causing the ratification. However, signing the Constitution can occur without the Constitution being ratified, such as when Washington signed the Constitution (that was ratified by the states of the U.S.). Similarly, I do not believe the case of a stabbing and a killing is governed by natural law. I have argued that the stabbing can occur without the killing.

Whether or not, and in which way, cases of causation may be counterfactually supporting has enjoyed a long and rich debate which it is beyond the bounds of this article to survey. However, it is a common view that "causal relations among events are somehow a matter of the patterns of counterfactual dependence to be found in them" (Collins, Hall and Pall 2004, 1) and I wish to pre-empt the counterfactual analysis of causation being used as a possible avenue of objection to a constitution view of events.

David Lewis (1973, 566) provided a famous counterfactual account of causation, "where *c* and *e* are two distinct possible events, *e* causally depends on *c* if and only if, if *c* were to occur *e* would occur; and if *c* were not to occur *e* would not occur." For the ratification of the U.S. Constitution to causally depend on the signing of the U.S. Constitution, were the signing to have occurred, the ratification would have occurred. And we already know this is not necessarily the case. We would also expect that were the signing not to have occurred, the ratification would not have



occurred. However, just as a statue can be constituted by a lump of clay or a lump of wax, the ratification of the U.S. Constitution can be constituted by a signing, or another similar event, such as a stamping.

Reconsider the case of the stabbing and the killing. For the killing to causally depend on the stabbing we would expect that were the stabbing to occur, the killing would occur—and I have argued that the stabbing could have taken place without the killing. And we would expect that were the stabbing not to occur, the killing would not occur. How strictly we should interpret the counterfactual has been a further matter of debate (e.g., Chisholm 1946; Goodman 1947; Lewis 1973). However, suppose we consider this case to be one of causation if it is counterfactually supporting in that, general regularity of laws of nature holding, were the stabbing not to have occurred, the killing would not have occurred. But the killing could have been constituted by something other than the stabbing.

The constitution view of events has been motivated by an ontological hierarchy between the stabbing and the killing. I have argued that the stabbing can occur without the killing, and as a statue cannot exist without matter, the killing cannot occur without the stabbing. However, what it means for a statue to be ontologically dependent on a piece of matter, or for the killing to be ontologically dependent on the stabbing, is for them to be ontologically dependent on some piece of matter, or some wounding event. Piece is a piece of matter that can undergo change in parts and still constitute Statue. Similarly, the event I have termed 'the stabbing' can undergo change and continue to remain the killing. Brutus may have bludgeoned Caesar to death and the event could still have fulfilled the criteria to constitute the event of the killing. Whether events such as the stabbing and the killing entirely co-occur and so begin and end at the same time, or whether events co-occur for some of the time the constituted event exists, co-occurrence is a necessary criterion for constitution.

Co-occurrence is of course a necessary but not sufficient condition for constitution. For example, at  $t_1$  I flipped on a light switch and at  $t_1$  Albert teased Toby. But the relation between those events is not constitution unless other criteria are met. One of these is that the co-occurring events are co-located. What it means for events to be co-located is not as straightforward as the case for objects and it seems that their spatial boundaries are vaguer than the spatial boundaries of objects. Yet the stabbing of Caesar took place in the Campus Martius as did the killing of

Caesar. The flipping of the light switch took place at the university whereas the teasing of Toby took place in the state library. The location of these latter two events is such that we wouldn't consider them to be co-located. For one event to be co-located with another is to happen in the same vague, bound region of space.<sup>4</sup>

#### *4.3 Physical and nonphysical events?*

Clause 6) of the definition of constitution for objects is designed to ensure that when a material object comes to constitute something of another kind, the constituted object is also material. What it would mean for an event to be material or immaterial is not straightforward. The analogous view for events would be to be a physical or nonphysical event.

For objects, clause 6) is designed to rule out cases where a material object comes to constitute an immaterial substance such as ectoplasm. In the case of events, the analogous situation we want to avoid is one in which a physical event, such as a brain process, comes to constitute an immaterial event, such as a sensation of a soul.

Adding this clause to the definition of the constitution relation for events may seem ad hoc. However, the constitution view tries to make sense of the world as we experience it. On Baker's practical realist approach, we know the world through various types of empirical involvement, including ordinary observation and a practical realist ontology explains those observations (Baker 2007, 15–20). There is no evidence, from our experience or our science, for the view that material objects constitute immaterial things. Our ordinary experience tells us that everyday objects are material things that can be broken. Our ordinary experience tells us that it really did rain yesterday and it was an event concerning the material world. Clause 6) is justified as a clause necessary to ensure the constitution view makes sense of the world as we know it.

#### *4.4 Constitution relation for events*

With the above considerations in mind, allowing some simplification in the account of constitution for events, here are five criteria for when event *x* constitutes event *y*:

- 1) *x* is co-located and co-occurs with *y*.
- 2) *x* is in circumstances favourable for *y* to occur.

- 3) It is necessary that for any event of  $x$ 's kind at  $t$  that's in favourable circumstances to the occurrence of  $y$  at  $t$ , there is some  $w$  of the kind of  $y$  that co-occurs and is co-located with the event of  $x$ 's kind at  $t$ .
- 4) It is possible that  $x$  could occur at  $t$  and there not be some other event of  $y$ 's type co-occurring and co-located with  $y$ .
- 5) If  $x$  is a physical event,  $y$  is also a physical event.

Here are some examples:

A signing of the U.S. Constitution constitutes a ratification of the U.S. Constitution if:

- 1) These two events are co-located and co-occur.
- 2) The signing of the U.S. Constitution occurred in circumstances favourable to the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. (Stipulated for constitution because without certain political circumstances etc., the signing of the Constitution would mean nothing.<sup>5</sup>)
- 3) Any event of the signing of the U.S. Constitution in circumstances favourable to the ratification of the Constitution will result in that ratification being co-located and co-occurring with the signing. (This is the case because once someone is in the right political circumstances to ratify the Constitution they are unable to sign the Constitution without ratifying it.)
- 4) The signing could have occurred without being co-located and co-occurring with the ratification (were the circumstances different).
- 5) The signing of the U.S. Constitution is a physical event and the ratification of the U.S. Constitution is also a physical event.

The stabbing of Caesar constitutes the killing of Caesar if:

- 1) The stabbing is co-located and co-occurs with the killing (keeping in mind that co-location and co-occurrence may be broadly construed).

- 2) The stabbing of Caesar occurred in circumstances favourable to the killing of Caesar (including that Caesar is mortal).
- 3) Any event of a stabbing in circumstances favourable to a killing will result in a killing being co-located and co-occurring with the stabbing.
- 4) The stabbing could have occurred without being co-located and co-occurring with a killing (were Caesar immortal).
- 5) The stabbing of Caesar is a physical event and the killing of Caesar is also a physical event.

According to this theory of events, the killing of Caesar is neither an event “over and above” the stabbing of Caesar, nor is it reducible to it. The distinction between the killing and the stabbing is a metaphysical distinction analogous to the distinction between a piece of clay and a statue. Whilst the killing and the stabbing of Caesar are distinct events, they are not distinct in the sense that they are mutually separable. There is an ontological dependence of the killing on the stabbing. Just as there wouldn’t be a statue without a constituting ball of clay, there wouldn’t have been a killing without a stabbing (or another constituting event). However, there could have been a stabbing without the killing and this is why a constitution relation is more appropriate than identity for events such as the flipping of the light switch and the alerting of the prowler, the stabbing and killing of Caesar and the signing and ratifying of the U.S. Constitution.<sup>6</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. It seems to me that a constituting entity does not need a primary-kind property in order to fulfil the intuitive application of the criteria of constitution. A constitution relation may hold between events such as the stabbing of Caesar and the killing of Caesar. Or it may hold between events such as the wedding and the many events which constitute it, including

the vow ('I do') and the promise ('I will...'). In the latter case, it does not seem appropriate to assign a primary-kind property to the collection of events which can come to constitute the wedding in appropriate circumstances. The primary-kind property that collection has is assigned because it constitutes a wedding. If it didn't come to constitute the wedding, the collection would be like any other collection of events and just be a random sum, with the only thing essential to it being that it has the same members. While this is a primary-kind property in one sense, on my view it is not a primary-kind property that assigns ontological significance.

2. If the other criteria of constitution are met for cases of events which co-occur only for part of the time one event exists, I see no reason not to accept that there are cases of constitution where events do not entirely co-occur. In fact, this will add to the ubiquitousness of the view.

3. An example of immanent causation is the Aristotelian example of the event of cutting the bread and the event of the bread being cut. These events co-occur but do not meet the remaining criteria for constitution. For example, on the constitution view of events there can be a change in one event, without a change in the other. In this case, the event of the bread being cut could not occur without the event of the cutting of the bread and vice versa. I am partial to the view that this is an example of one event explained in two ways, rather than a cause of causation. However, it is beyond the bounds of my article to defend this view.

4. If I were to broadly construe co-occurrence, then I would also be lead to broadly construe event co-location. If the victim of a stabbing survived until they reached hospital, the killing would have occurred in a wider region of space than the stabbing.

5. It's worth pointing out that the political circumstances which make it the case that there's a Constitution and not just a piece of paper do not also necessitate that signing is ratifying. There are additional circumstances required for the signing to be ratification. This is important because otherwise, anytime there was a signing there'd be ratification and then I'd think of the relation between them as identity, not constitution.

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